

Following is an excerpt from the January 20th edition of "The Latest," a daily newsletter published by Butch Weedon, the Montana Fire Service Training Director.

Blocked Railroad Crossings Impact Emergency Response

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Is your emergency response delayed by a train blocking a crossing?

If so, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) wants to hear from you.

"The recently passed (federal) highway bill mandates that we study the impact of blocked railroad crossings on emergency services," said Robert Martin, FRA director of intermodal planning and economics.

Martin said he's depending on EMS personnel and police from around the country to let him know what's going on at railroad crossings. "There's just no other way to get the information."

The FRA is working with the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) as well as with state highway officials to determine the extent of the problem. "We're also hearing about possible solutions such as dispatching units on both sides of the tracks. But, that can't happen unless there's a system in place to notify communications when the crossing is blocked..."

Getting a break in a mile-long train is difficult, and Martin said emergency units have been forced to drive miles around the blockage. "When a train hits a car, and the crossing is blocked for hours while the police investigate, it can cause huge problems."

Martin said he understands how valuable time is when EMS personnel are responding to a heart attack victim. "With all the advances, they really do make a difference in the outcome."

Just as the number of EMS calls has increased, so has locomotive traffic. In Nebraska, two railroad lines are running more than 150 trains daily.

Martin said California officials have shared their experiences, and how they developed a system to notify personnel when crossings will be blocked for a period of time.

Responders who want to share information, concerns or stories about delays should include the location and number of the crossing; name of the railroad, and contact information of the EMS company involved.

Comments can be e-mailed to Robert.Martin@FRA.DOT.GOV Martin said he's anxious to hear from anyone as he is relying on civilians to supply the data for the study.